A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF PARTICULAR ETHICAL STATEMENTS

BY
WILLIAM HENRY HAY
A. B., Haverford College, 1938
A. M., Brown University, 1939

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1942

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This thesis starts from the puzzle of how to deal with disagreements in ethics. Some disagreements are disputes over concrete questions. Others concern differences in the method of theorizing used to study and settle such questions. My study of the ethical writings of G. E. Moore led me to feel that they would help make clear ways of settling both kinds of disputes and make explicit the reasons involved. I therefore expounded and examined Moore's views on the starting-point and method of ethics. His views seemed to me to be on the right track, but they have not been at all convincing to many philosophers. Consideration of certain points about the way Moore treats language (which is the way language usually *is* treated) suggested a way of showing the important points in his view more clearly. More detailed attention to the place that language has in ethical disputes and in ethical philosophizing suggested advantages in beginning ethics with certain every-day *sentences*, instead of, as Moore says, "certain every-day judgments". I therefore recast Moore's views in the following recommendations for ethical philosophizing:

(a) that ethical philosophizing be conducted in connection with study of particular cases of disagreement

(b) that its starting-point be certain every-day sentences that are uttered in such disagreements

(c) that we go at understanding these utterances by studying the setting and context in which they occur, and in addition both similar contexts and settings, and contexts and settings in which similar utterances occurred.

By applying these recommendations to ethical theories and concrete ethical disputes I obtained the following results:

(a) I have been able to give some account of the way in which ethical disputes occur and are carried on.

(b) I have been able to give some account of the kinds of evidence for ethical assertions. In particular I extended Moore's study of the word "good". Moore's own formulation did not help much by saying that when we say that a thing is good in itself, we mean that it possesses intrinsically a property named by us "good". On the other hand it does not help much for the dogmatic naturalist to give some definition of "good". A hedonist may say "that he means by the term 'good' a certain kind of conscious state or felt process which, along with other persons, he calls 'pleasure' "[1], but *I* want to know about the question I ask when *I* ask "Is it good?" and "How good is it?" Although it is true that "the only ground on which we can criticize the standards of another critic is the ground of validity"[2], where valid means "derived from the definition of value assumed"[3], I can also criticize a philosopher if what he wants me to accept does not give me help with the problem I am bothered by. I have not tried in this thesis to *define* "good" by other words. I agree with Moore that " 'good' means 'good' ". I recognize that it is a word used and understood by people every day. What I want is to know the ways the word actually *is* used by people. Some helpful distinctions in the way it is used can made on the basis of the kind of evidence which substantiates statements containing the word.

(c) I have described two distinctions in usage. The first is that which Moore emphasized between "good in itself" and "good as means". I have recast this in a form which brings out that the source of the distinction is the kind of evidence. The word "good" is said to be used in an intrinsic sense when we would justify saying that something was good wholly by mentioning properties of the thing itself without regard to

its consequences. The word "good" is said to be used in an instrumental sense when we would justify saying something was good not by properties intrinsic to it, but by saying it will have or will tend to have certain effects.

The second distinction is that between what I have called specific and preferential uses of "good". In one case we say a thing is good and are contradicted only when some one says : "There's nothing good about it". In other cases we express an estimate of how good a thing is. We are contradicted if some one says : "It's really pretty bad." or "Well, it's not so awfully good." Or if we have stated its preferential relation to some other thing, we are contradicted when somebody says : "Oh really one's as another." or "I rate this above yours."

(d) By studying the utterances we see better what the disputes are about. We see the importance of asking if something is good, because we view such questions in the setting in which they arise. Thus there is no inescapable need for metaphysical justification of the answers to ethical questions. We see that it is only by analyzing what evidence people expect will substantiate their statements that we can go on to decide whether what they say is true.

(e) I examined one particular ethical dispute to show what use my general method and these distinctions can be. I used a controversy in a Quaker periodical between absolute pacifists and those who judged that war is sometimes the best course in the circumstances.

These results of the general method are of course only provisional. Much development and application is needed.

1. J. R. Reid. *A Theory of Value*, p. 38.
2. *ibid.*, p. 263.
3. *ibid.*, p. 262.

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VITA

William Henry Hay was born in Washington, D. C., June 9, 1917, the son of Edward Northup Hay and his wife, Doris Drain Hay. He attended the public schools of Philadelphia for six years. In 1929 he entered the William Penn Charter School in that city. In 1934 he was graduated with Honor and was admitted to Haverford College. Here he did his major work in philosophy and languages. He studied in philosophy under Professors T. R. Kelly, D. V. Steere, and D. E. Trueblood; in Latin under Professors H. Comfort and D. P. Lockwood; in Greek under Professor L. A. Post; in English under Professors J. L. Hotson and W. A. Reitzel.

Under the direction of Professor Lockwood he prepared a translation from Latin of *De Immortalitate Animae* by the sixteenth century Italian philosopher, Petrus Pomponatius. This was published by Haverford College in the fall of 1938

In June 1938 he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Haverford College and was appointed Scholar in Philosophy at Brown University.

In June 1939 he received the degree of Master of Arts in Philosophy with a thesis entitled *The Predicate "Good" According to G. E. Moore.* During the academic year 1939-1940 he taught in Brown University as half-time Assistant in Philosophy. At Brown University he studied with Professors C. A. Baylis, R. M. Blake, C. J. Ducasse, and A. E. Murphy. During these two years he was closely associated with Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, then also a graduate student, and learned much from many discussions with him.

In September 1940 he was admitted to the Graduate School of the University of Illinois and was appointed Assistant in Philosophy. He passed his preliminary examinations for the doctorate in May 1941 and began work on this thesis. He was appointed Fellow in Philosophy in the University of Illinois for the academic year 1941-1942 and continued work on this thesis. He spent the summer of 1942 revising the thesis. At the time it was accepted in September 1942 he had been commissioned Ensign, U. S. N. R. At the University of Illinois he studied Philosophy under Professors M. Black, H. Gomperz, D. W. Gotshalk, Dean M. T. McClure, and Professor A. E. Murphy. He studied Sociology in two seminars under Professor F. Znaniecki.

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